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ABSTRACT

With America's growing commitment to global education and intercultural understanding, one option for reading foreign literature is to study the text from a cross-cultural perspective, decoding the cultural assumptions both in the work and in the reader's perceptions of that work. Contrasting elements of the French and American value systems, of the languages themselves, the constructs of role expectations and their variations, and the perception of past and future shows how communication interference or misreading of a French text by an American student can occur. "L'Etranger" by Albert Camus is an appropriate work to demonstrate cross-cultural reading because it is stylistically, thematically, and historically a classic. It offers a cross-cultural appreciation of several structures including the importance of tradition, the use of models, the privileged place of deductive reasoning, culture-bound role expectations, action chains, sensory overload, nonviolent signs of aggression, and the notions of honor, family, and ego. (MSE)

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Reading Literature Cross-Culturally:

Albert Camus's L'Etranger

Louise Fiber Luce

With America's growing commitment to global education and intercultural understanding, one option for reading foreign literature is to study the text from a cross-cultural perspective. This is to say, there is a decoding of cultural assumptions not only in the work itself, but also in the reader's perception of that work. The text is thus doubly inscribed, engaging the often divergent cultural perceptions of both the reader and the author. This essay will examine more closely the theory of reading cross-culturally. We will first consider the "What" and "Why" of cross-cultural studies in the foreign language classroom. Next we will look at a specific work, L'Etranger by Albert Camus, to which we will apply a cross-cultural analysis. In this manner we hope to show the value of cross-cultural reading when teaching a foreign literature.

For many of us the cross-cultural study of literature is a new enterprise, using methods other than those usually associated with the traditional foreign language curriculum. Rather, cross-cultural reading draws on theories of culture and communication from several disciplines lying outside the usual critical foundations of the humanities in this country. Sociology, psychology, communications and anthropology have suggested another, additional critical apparatus with which to study a work of literature. Indeed, we have learned that the empirical data of the social scientists offer conclusions similar to the message of the

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software of culture. Like the social scientists' data, our folk art, our rituals and the very literature we study recover the same value orientations within the society in question.[1]

It is reasonable to ask at this point: Does a student need to examine his or her own culturally conditioned perceptions of reality in order to appreciate a work of literature? Not necessarily, of course; but it offers a new method, a new option to understand peoples through their language and literature at a time when the deeper the understanding, the greater our ability to communicate in matters of global concern. Of equal importance, moreover, the American students come to understand through self-reflection what values, mostly unconscious and unstated, prevail in their own society. Thus there is both self-learning and learning about other cultures.

An analogy was recently drawn by Max S. Kirch.[2] As teachers of language, we generally accept that students in a foreign language class must abandon their own phonological habits if they are to avoid a "foreign accent" in the target language. Thus foreign language students learn new habits, are deprogrammed, as it were, from using the unconscious pronunciation patterns of their mother tongue. Yet if we acknowledge the need to contrast critically speech patterns of English and a second language, it is not yet common in literature courses to alert students in a systematic way to the unconscious modes of perception and value assumptions they bring to the work of literature. Nor do we usually suggest the need to adopt a new mode of seeing, or at least to recognize that for a Senegalese, a Frenchman, a Haitian

or an American, there are alternate modes of selecting and structuring reality.

We can illustrate this point by contrasting several elements of the French and American value systems which could cause communication interference or a misreading of a French text by the American student.

Let us begin by comparing cognitive patterns. We find that the American tends to use the more operational structure of inductive reasoning. This pattern is eminently appropriate to organize and execute, that is to say, to accomplish actions or to carry out projects. The value placed on inductive reasoning is one part of a cluster of American values, including those of egalitarianism and self-reference, rather than group-reference. Hence the locus of responsibility for action is the self; so too is the source of motivation to act. Since the definition of "self" is usually quite difficult for an American to verbalize, it grows instead from our measurable, visible and personal achievements (those same acts accomplished through the operational, inductive mode of problem solving). Slowly a network of associated values begins to stand out, among which is inductive reasoning.

It is from the above frame of reference that the American student must be introduced to the value of le Verbe in French culture. Unlike the American who places high value on doing, for the French, priority is given to the word, to the conceptual world, and thus to introspection and abstraction.[3] One finds as well "oughtness" or value placed by the French on tradition,

whether political or esthetic (i.e., le droit divin or Boileau's L'Art poétique) and on setting forth abstract, general patterns (i.e., Rationalism or l'honnête homme).

When we turn to language itelf, we see similar contrasts which can further disorient the American and hinder an insightful appreciation of the foreign literature in question. At the risk of generalizing, English is a language of description rather than analysis; thus it contains a significantly larger lexicon of adjectives and adverbs. These are the parts of speech needed to render a meticulously objective picture of reality (the "completed action" we have just commented on). For the French, however, reality is foremost to be interpreted, analyzed and judged (once more, deductive reasoning is called up). If speakers of English describe effects (i.e., accomplishments, achievements) rather than causes, the French, instead, will ask "Why?" "By what means?" And in order to respond--to clarify and evaluate--there is a greater insistence in French on conjunctions, prepositions, and other relational components. In the same manner, English usage of the passive voice ties in with a static picture of an activity already completed, that measurable, visible and personal record of achievement we spoke of earlier which defines the American self.[4]

One sees then that even student comprehension exercises which often accompany the work of literature need to take into account alternative cognitive patterns and linguistic structures. The use of sentence-combining exercises, for example, takes on unexpected implications when cast into a comparative framework.

American learners, when placed before a plethora of French conjunctions, are being asked to establish relationships literally foreign to their mode of perception. They are unprepared to analyze with nuance and exactness the function of a relational word, whether it is one of oppostion or comparison, of condition, consequence or cause. Learning cross-culturally will acknowledge these hidden obstacles and take them into consideration when teaching language through literature.

As for the narrative itself, here we would need to discuss the constructs of role expectations and their variations across cultures, or the place of history and the past which can be contrasted with the future-oriented effort and optimism of the American ("No hurdle is too high! No obstacle too great!"). Likewise, the structuring of space, hierarchies of authority, and the parameters of public self-disclosure and privacy lend themselves to a cross-cultural appreciation.

When we turn to the literatures of other Francophone countries--a folktale or poem from Zaire, for example, other clusters of values as complex and diverse will be reflected in them. Consider that the American reader comes from a low context society, where information is transferred primarily by media technologies.[5] For this reason, personal contact is less frequent, public gathering places (parks, squares, plazas) are fewer, and self-exposure is more cautious. On the other hand, the high context cultures found frequently in developing societies would depend on both personal contact and setting to transfer information. The high degree of touching and eye contact and the need

for closer physical proximity are characteristics symptomatic of the high-context society. The role of the extended family, objects of veneration, folk heroes or one's relationship with the environment are further indicators of value systems whose existence, let alone importance, could well go unheeded by American students. For them, completion of a project or high achievement is valued more highly in our American society than group consensus or veneration of the past.

How far astray cultural blindspots can lead us when we teach literature of other cultures is illustrated in two recent studies: "Colonialistic Attitudes Toward the French-Speaking World in American Textbooks" by Joel Walz and "Asia in American Textbooks" by the Asia Society.[6] Indeed, the latter study has been instrumental for several textbook rewriting projects already underway.

To demonstrate a cross-cultural reading, L'Etranger by Albert Camus is an unusually appropriate work. It is a classic text from several points of view. Stylistically it represents the classic writer's ambition to a measured prose. Sober, emotionally controlled, without embellishment or flourish, the text draws its energy in part from the French cultural frame of Cartesian logic. Thematically it belongs to the European humanist tradition. Yet the text is also classic in another sense. It is by now a work routinely found in the undergraduate curriculum, from twentieth century literature courses in English translation to Intermediate French language courses.

L'Etranger demonstrates to the American student how one's life is molded and controlled by a society's value orientations, those qualities a society unconsciously prizes in the members of the community.[7] In turn, this abstract, generalized sense of "oughtness" is reflected in discrete, specific forms of behavior. Both value and behavior pattern comprise a hidden agenda passed onto succeeding generations. From parent to child. In L'Etranger, one would expect it to be passed from Madame Meursault to her son. American student readers will first need to understand the extent of society's control over their own culture and behavior and, next, how more intense it is in the more highly-structured French culture. Only then will they understand the kind of threat Meursault offers to the community.

Moreover, what the American reader of L'Etranger will also begin to realize is the importance of the model in French culture: "Here is the pattern; replicate the pattern." "Here are the symptoms; fit them to the cause from the ready-made slate of models." Given the French predilection to judge and evaluate, we begin to see the full import of the frequent and prompt admonition in the text of "Ca ne se fait pas," or "On ne fait pas ça," with its ubiquitous, judgmental pronoun on. It is from this perspective, this deviation from the model, that Meursault is "monstrueux."

To communicate to the students a sense of the extent of this control, the teacher may wish to focus on the concept of role expectations. After all, Meursault's greatest crime was to fail to carry out his role as society expected. Starting once more

with the students' own frame of reference, they have only to look at their immediate setting. What do they expect from a teacher? What is implicitly understood and agreed upon to be the teacher's role? How is it played out in specific behavior patterns? What is the student's role? Why do exchange students to American high schools or colleges often have difficulty adjusting to the U.S. school system? How are role expectations for a parent or daughter defined? As we know, not only will definitions change from culture to culture, there will be variations within the students' own responses. Nonetheless, there will still be limits set on one's role within each culture. Beyond that, censure will fall on the community member if the limit is transgressed.

Thus in L'Etranger, the specificity of the act of murder is less outrageous and threatening to the stability of the community than the covert act of filial impiety. Meursault has failed to meet the expectations of the group. For the American readers, with their frame of reference of the self, they see only the innocuous misdeed of a son who shows indifference to an elderly parent's welfare and who refuses to engage in ritual bereavement. However, we know that in Camus's text Meursault's indifference will exact society's harshest payment: "Le concierge a dit que je n'avais pas voulu voir maman, que j'avais fumé, que j'avais dormi et que j'avais pris du café au lait. J'ai senti alors quelque chose qui soulevait toute la salle [the courtroom] et, pour la première fois, j'ai compris que j'étais coupable" (p. 108).[8]

Yet if Meursault is a son, he is also an employee, a lover and a friend. Here too, in each instance he fails to fulfill the

expectations of those roles. He even refuses to perform acceptably as a criminal, both for the examining magistrate and the prison chaplain. The relentlessness of the social order toward such a person is fully apparent in Part II of the text. Confronting the testimony of both the director and the concierge of the rest home, of Madame Meursault's friend, Thomas Pérez, and of Marie and Raymond, Meursault's lawyer must ask: "Enfin, est-il accusé d'avoir enterré sa mère ou d'avoir tué un homme?" (p. 114). The prosecutor is unequivocal in his response: "Oui, s'est-il écrié avec force, j'accuse cet homme d'avoir enterré une mère avec un coeur de criminel" (p. 114).

At this point in the narrative, students will have an opportunity to discuss not only culturally specific activities related to death and mourning, contrasted to their own culture. They can also be introduced to the capital importance of tradition in French society. It is, in fact, difficult to comprehend either Meursault or his jurors without grasping how necessary tradition is for the French to protect social and political stability. Since tradition is embedded in codified structures like legal systems, criminal codes, and courtroom procedures, as well as the rites of mourning, students can be introduced to many of these too.

Society's cruelest vengeance against Meursault is perhaps even worse then death. During his trial, society deprives him of his selfhood and civic status, reducing him to a nonperson, a nullité sociale. Students can trace the evolution of his position. Meursault first comments on it early in his trial: "Je

peux dire qu'on a beaucoup parlé de moi et peut-être plus de moi que de mon crime" (p. 116). Later he notes: "En quelque sorte, on avait l'air de traiter cette affaire en dehors de moi. Tout se déroulait sans mon intervention. Mon sort se réglait sans qu'on prenne mon avis" (p. 116). Finally, when the lawyer speaks as if he were Meursault, using the first-person pronoun, Meursault's bewilderment becomes evident: "Moi, j'ai pensé que c'était m'écarter de l'affaire, me réduire à zéro" (p. 121).

We have said little so far about the Algerian setting of L'Etranger. The physical presence of the Mediterranean basin, nonetheless, frames the entire narrative. For the outsider, for the reader foreign to that part of the world, the intensity of sun, the color of sky and ocean, the teeming market places and verdant oases open up interesting cross-cultural issues. The contrast begins already in an introduction to the Camus text written by Germaine Brée and Carlos Lynes, Jr. The editors compare Algiers' casbah, "the picturesque old Arab town, with its narrow, noisy streets and its motley population tightly packed in high, terraced houses" to the modern European sections of the surrounding hills "dotted with gleaming white buildings and sun-lit villas" (p.5). Moving from this sensory-intensive (and highly judgmental) observation, they next evoke the "sensuous, pagan, yet austere Mediterranean world," and later "the beauty of this land and its wealth of sensations." They fail however to insert these comments into a cultural context. Yet to do so would allow our students to deal with this world on its own terms in light of their own cultural landscape.

People from Mediterranean cultures, for example, often note their feeling of sensory deprivation when they are displaced to less temperate climates. They perceive a lack of the smells and sounds and intense visual contact that underscore normal social discourse. They note the infrequence of touching and an absence of close spatial relationships. Here is a time for American students to reflect on the complicity between physical geography and human nature.

The instructor can also encourage students to engage in some simple non-verbal communication exercises that will close the cultural distance between reader and text. One of the most common has the students standing in pairs. One begins a conversation, while the listener meanwhile never loses eye contact, never glances away at frequent intervals with the timing Americans use. They can then amend the process, with the listener making no eye contact at all. Next, the teacher can suggest that the speaker this time use the eye movement patterns just described for the listener; never glancing away or omitting eye contact altogether.[9] Throughout the activity, students will begin to feel, in all probability, a new way of relating to the interlocutor. Next, the pair might want to change the physical space between them by shortening it, all the while continuing their conversation. After five minutes of this activity, they will start to redefine aggression as it is often played out in the use of space and eye contact in Arab cultures.

Now students can look once more at the Camus text and begin to feel the underlying tension when the Arabs confront Raymond

and his friends. As we will see, the visual aggression intensifies progressively. In front of the tobacco store, "les Arabes nous regardaient en silence, mais à leur manière, ni plus ni moins que si nous étions des pierres ou des arbres morts" (p. 69). Later, after the first encounter on the beach between the Arabs and Raymond, Meursault and Masson, the Arabs "ont reculé lentement sans cesser de nous regarder et de nous tenir en respect avec le couteau" (p. 75).

In the succeeding episode where only Meursault and Raymond are with the Arabs now, "celui qui avait frappé Raymond le regardait sans rien dire," while his Arab companion continued playing the small flute, "en nous regardant du coin de l'oeil"(p. 76). In rapid succession the sequence intensifies: "Ils se regardaient toujours"; then "sans se quitter des yeux son adversaire, Raymond m'a demandé: 'Je le descends?'" (p. 76). In the final confrontation which erupts in the murder of the Arab, Meursault, alone now, states: "Nous nous regardions sans baisser les yeux" (p. 77). At the last moment, even though blinded by the sun, Meursault observes: je devinais son regard (of the Arab) par instants"; and as he was about to pull the trigger, "je n'avais pas cessé de regarder l'Arabe" (p. 78).

Not unrelated to the Mediterranean setting and forming part of a larger value cluster is the Arabs' notion of family. Here the locus of responsibility is tied to the larger, extended family unit rather than to the individual, where we tend to find it in American culture. For them, one is responsible first to the family, rather than to oneself. Thus one is motivated to act

because of the family, to protect a family member and to correct or avenge an insult to the family honor. On the whole, the definition of honor is more closely linked to the collective ego of the family than in our culture, so closely in fact that an affront to one's honor frequently explodes into violent action. If we have already noted the value placed on the intensity of sensory input for Mediterranean cultures, there is no less value placed on emotional intensity, especially as it relates action chains. To borrow a sociological term, an action chain is a series of steps that move an act from its beginning to its conclusion[10].

Our cross-cultural interest in action chains lies in the fact that Americans break off an activity more readily than people from certain other cultures, especially those from high context cultures described earlier in this paper. Consider, for instance, matters of friendship. Among international students in this country, especially from Third World countries, Americans are notorious for abandoning a relationship if it fails to develop as they had hoped. They will simply start a new association elsewhere.

In the North African world, however, it is quite difficult to interrupt the action chain once it has begun. The action follows an inexorable progression until it is completed. To give an example from another Mediterranean culture, the vendetta of Sicily follows this pattern. Only an exceptionally strong third party can interrupt the chain once it is set in motion in these cultures. The sense of fatality or inevitability we speak of

here will allow the American student readers another opportunity for self-reflection. By explaining the structure of action chains and how they are executed according to one's culture, the student readers will enter more sensitively into the Camus setting and their own.

Thus, during the first part of the narrative and almost hidden by the predominance of Meursault and his first person discourse, lies a second, cultural discourse wedded to action chains. Frequent instances of violence in L'Etranger complement the visual aggression we have already documented. To reprise the stages of an action chain (and one which is tied to the notion of honor), Raymond, believing his Arab mistress is unfaithful, beats her "until she bleeds" (p. 50). Next, to avenge the woman's honor, her brother has his first fight with Raymond: it brings "blows to the face, kicks to the body and a bloodied face" (p. 48). Later Raymond is followed by a group of Arabs, "among whom was the brother of his former mistress" (p. 61). On the fatal day, encounter follows encounter, each accelerating in speed and intensity. As Raymond and his friends leave for the beach, Meursault notes: "J'ai vu un groupe d'Arabes adossés à la devanture du bureau de tabac. . . des Arabes qui en voulaient à Raymond" (p. 69). In swift succession are the three subsequent confrontations on the beach (pp. 74, 76, 78). The number of adversaries is reduced each time until Meursault remains alone with his victim.

When we summarize our analysis of the Camus narrative we see

that it has offered a cross-cultural appreciation of several structures which we have discussed only briefly here. They include the importance of tradition, the use of models, the privileged place of deductive reasoning, culture-bound role expectations, action chains, sensory overload, non-violent signs of aggression, and the notions of honor, family and ego.

From the example of L'Etranger, two underlying premises bound to a cross-cultural reading of literature have emerged. The first is the place of a self-conscious appraisal of our own culture in order to understand better who we are. By this means we reveal those hidden cultural agendas we acquire as part of our birthright and which we inevitably bring to a work of foreign literature. The next premise rests on the need to make explicit alternative cultural patterns as they arise from the work of literature. This double inscribing or "reading" of the text defuses possible intercultural miscommunication and, further, lends legitimacy to other cultural realities. This double goal cannot fail to enrich the quality of the learning American students experience when reading cross-culturally.

NOTES

[1] Elwood Hartman, "A Profile of French National Character," Contemporary French Civilization, 4, 1 (1979), 45-65.

[2] Max S. Kirch, "Non-Verbal Communication Across Cultures," Modern Language Journal, 63, 8 (1979), 416-423.

[3] Edward C. Stewart, "American Assumptions and Values: Orientation to Action," in E. F. Smith and Louise Fiber Luce, Toward Internationalism (Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1979), pp. 1-22.

[4] See Carolyn Durham's informative article, "Language as Culture," French Review, 54, 2 (1980), 210-224.

[5] For a discussion of low context/high context societies, see Edward Hall, Beyond Culture (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), Chapter 7.

[6] Joel Walz, "Colonialistic Attitudes Toward the French-Speaking World in American Textbooks," Contemporary French Civilization, 5, 1 (1980), 357-367. The Asia Society, "Asia in American Textbooks," in E. F. Smith and Louise F. Luce, Toward Internationalism (Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1979), pp. 141-172.

[7] Stewart, op. cit.

[8] Albert Camus, L'Etranger, Germaine Brée and Carlos Lynes, Jr., eds. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955). My underlining.

[9] These exercises were used in the Cross-Cultural Non-verbal Communication Workshop held at University of California, Los Angeles, in 1979 and directed by Carol E. Saltzman.

[10] Hall, Chapter 10.